

Polling update: Vance's impact + Biden's prospects

Episode #116



ON THE BALLOT

A BALLOTPEDIA PODCAST



Podcast Transcript

116: Kondik

Festa: Welcome to *On the Ballot* with Ballotpedia, where we connect people to politics by providing neutral, nonpartisan, and reliable information on our government, how it works, and where it's headed. I'm Frank Festa. Thanks for being with us. Today, I'm joined by Kyle Kondik, who's the Managing Editor of *Sabato's Crystal Ball* at the University of Virginia's Center for Politics.

Kyle Kondik is a frequently cited expert on American politics who has appeared on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, PBS NewsHour, and many others. And Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* to name a few. With all of the news we've seen regarding the presidential race as of late, we figured there'd be nobody better to have on the show than a pollster.

Kyle, thanks for coming back on the show.

Kondik: Thanks for having me.

Festa: And what a week it is. We're really excited to have you on, lots for us to dive into. But this might change by the time this episode comes out on July 18th. We're recording two days prior on Tuesday, but as of now, I haven't seen any major polling on how the assassination attempt on former president and current candidate Trump affects his outlook and what folks are thinking about in terms of his prospects, but candidly, a lot of the folks I've been talking to these last couple of days, both professionally and personally feel that he's got all of the momentum.

At this point, is that just conjecture and observation, or are you seeing any hard evidence in polling that points to that being the case?

Kondik: Uh, I don't think there's been much indication yet that the race has changed, um, in the past few days, although, again, you're not gonna really see updated polling, and, you know, also because of the compressed timeline here, obviously the horrible thing that happened on Saturday, um, And with the assassination attempt, and then the selection of J.D. Vance as Trump's running

mate, which came out on Monday, and then the ongoing Republican National Convention, to the extent the polls do change, and maybe they will, maybe they won't, it'll be hard to sort of disentangle, like, what the actual cause was. Um, because again, you have so many big things happening at, at, at sort of right at the same time, but really Trump has been ahead in this race in the polls for many months now.

Um, and you know, the, the fact that things aren't really changing in Joe Biden's favor is sort of by definition good for Donald Trump. It's like after the debate, which, which, you know, Biden had a horrible performance at. Um, It wasn't so much that the numbers decidedly moved against him, although there were sort of whispers of internal polls that showed that.

But I think a lot of the public numbers seem pretty similar, but the numbers were bad for Biden before the debate and they were as bad or even worse after the debate. So, you know, when you're in Trump's position, um, no changes is a good thing. You know, he's not the one who needs to change the numbers. Biden is.

Festa: Sure. And we'll get into Vance and Biden's debate performance, which feels like forever ago. It was only a few weeks ago. We'll talk about both. In just a moment, last time I checked, *Sabato's Crystal Ball* had the presidential race as a toss up. Is that still the case?

Kondik: You know, so in our ratings, we have, uh, 251 electoral votes at least leading to Trump, 226 to Biden, then 61 electoral votes worth of toss ups.

And, you know, I was, I, I, I've been characterizing this race as, you know, You know, basically a toss up and very close to competitive for much of the election cycle. I don't really feel that way as we're speaking now. I think I look at Trump as more of a favorite at this point. Um, I think that is reflected in our ratings, although you could argue that, um, that, uh, you know, that some of our toss up states could maybe be leaning to Trump and, uh, you know, That that's something we're, we're constantly sort of evaluating internally.

But, um, I just, you know, just, it just, just doesn't, the numbers again, haven't been good for Biden for a long time. Uh, and you know, we're, we're sort of getting, getting to the point where you'd really think the numbers would be sort of more meaningful, um, particularly after the conventions, you know, the RNC is going out right now, the DNC is not, not until next month, but you know, to those in the democratic side who are worried about Biden's ability to win this election, I mean, it seems very reasonable to me to worry.

And I don't know if there's really any prospect of him leaving the race. Um, but again, I could really see where where that concern is coming from because the situation is not great. That's not to say that Biden is hopelessly behind. I think there's some pessimism that you see in sort of, you know, You know off the record or on background quotes from democrats saying that you know Biden's toast They're preparing for the second Trump administration all that that seems a little bold to me But again, I also don't think this election is a toss up.

I did feel that way prior to the debate, but I think that that I just I just don't really feel that way anymore

Festa: Yeah, do you see the race ratings officially changing then on your guys's end? I know it takes a while to get all the data and do the polling and whatnot, but do you feel like that'll change in the coming weeks?

Kondik: It very well could. I, you know, I don't, I don't want to commit to anything. But, uh, and it is, it's, it's sort of a time where things are, things are a little bit in flux because of the convention and all that. But, um, but yeah, let's put it this way. I mean, We have, you know, we have, we have Trump ahead in our ratings now, and to the extent I think we'd be thinking about making rating changes, they wouldn't be positive ones for Democrats, they'd be positive ones for Republicans.

Um, I just think that's, that's the reality right now.

Festa: Yeah, it certainly seems like it. And when we were emailing a little bit and preparing to, uh, to get ready for this interview, we didn't quite know yet who

Trump's running mate was going to be, but now, again, we're recording on Tuesday, this episode's coming out on Thursday.

We know that it's J. D. Vance, the freshman senator from Ohio. Former venture capitalist and the author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, which came out, I believe, eight or so years ago. Why do you think Trump went with Vance?

Kondik: It seems like a lot of people in Trump's orbit really pushed for Vance. You know, Vance, um, kind of in, in some ways is, is an extreme version of the, the path that a lot of Republicans have taken over the course of the last decade, basically not liking Trump and then, then coming around to him.

And Vance, I think went from, you know, being very critical of Trump to being very, very supportive of Trump. Uh, which again is just kind of mirrors the path. A lot of other Republicans, um, took. I also think that. Ideologically, uh, Vance is sort of simpatico with Trump, or is sort of, you know, he's, he's, he's, you know, Vance has been critical of kind of the old guard Republicans, which sort of seem to be a group that's, that's waning in influence.

Um, you know, very critical of American aid to Ukraine. Um, he has sounded some populist kinds of themes on, on economic issues, although um, you know, it's, it, it, uh, How much of that is real and how much of that is sort of sort of bluster is hard to know. But, you know, he spoke favorably of, of, uh, Uh, of, of, of Lena Kahn, for instance, and, and, you know, the, and, uh, the Biden administration on antitrust, which is not really a position you really think of associating with Republicans generally.

Um, so I do, I find Vance to be a pretty interesting figure. He's also been the subject of so many kind of big, splashy magazine profiles and has spoken to a lot of reporters. And so, you know, a lot of his viewpoints are, are, um, are out there in ways that maybe they're, they're not for other members who aren't as.

You know, public and aren't on TV as much or don't do as many interviews. Um, but I see this as sort of a, a, a, a kind of a, more of a governing choice. Um, for, for Trump, I don't necessarily know if advance adds all that much electorally, but I

don't think any running mate choice these days really adds all that much electorally.

Festa: Yeah, I think that's certainly fair. What's the polling tell us about how the Trump Vance ticket stacks up against Biden Harris.

Kondik: I, I don't think we can say at this point, I mean, again, we know the Trump versus Biden numbers and I don't think the running mate choices really, um, matter all that much. You know, you've, you've heard some suggestions from Republicans that, you know, that Vance would be sort of camped out in Pennsylvania and the sort of industrial north more broadly.

Um, I, I don't know if Vance actually has any sort of special appeal in those places. I mean, again, it's a, it seems kind of easy and pat to say, oh, well, he's from the Midwest, therefore he helps in the Midwest. But like, Does he really? I, I mean, maybe he does. I, I, you know, and I, um, I'm curious to see if we get any data that suggests that, but, um, I don't, I, I, I would want to see, I'd want to see some evidence of that first before just proclaiming it.

Festa: Yeah, I think evidence is always the best bet here, you know, that we want these instant results and answers, but things just don't work that way, right?

Kondik: Yeah, I mean, look, the last, uh, Ohioan picked to a national ticket was, was Governor John Bricker way back in 1944. Um, he was Thomas Dewey's running mate.

That was FDR's last election. And the Dewey Bricker ticket actually carried Ohio by a few tenths of a percentage point. I think you could probably argue that in that kind of range, Bricker probably did help deliver Ohio. That's one of the, the, the few times, uh, uh, in, you know, modern history where Ohio did not vote for the presidential winner, although it's not a bellwether state anymore.

Um, it's moved right in the, in the Trump era. Um, And, you know, but those were the days I think we're running mates probably did make more of a difference again. I think our politics are so nationalized now that I don't, you know, maybe there's a,

there's a marginal impact on Ohio, but, um, in the Midwest, but, but again, I wouldn't, I wouldn't necessarily expect anything dramatic.

Festa: It seems less and less likely by the day. But. We talked about this a few beats back, any inkling of how a different Democratic ticket might fare against this new Republican ticket if Biden was to actually step aside, I think again, it seems less and less likely, um, but what do you think? Anything you've seen?

Kondik: I've sort of come around to the idea that Democrats would be wiser to nominate someone else. I know that someone Kamala Harris as the vice president. She's the logical person to sort of, to sort of take over. You know, she is not particularly popular herself. Um, you know, I think she's faced a lot of criticism for both her for 2020 presidential campaign and also her kind of public performances as vice president, but I think it's at the point where Dems might want to think about rolling the dice.

But again, it's not really up to them I mean, they're, you know, democrats can exert some public pressure on on Joe Biden but ultimately Biden has basically all the delegates Um, and uh, and it's up to him whether to drop out or not You Um, but, but I, I, I do see Biden's position as, as, as, as dire and arguably getting more dire now.

Look, maybe, you know, maybe he's able to sort of regenerate his support and bring the kind of anti-Trump coalition back together, but we've just been waiting for months to see some indication that that's happening and there's really not, there's really not a good, good signs. And I also don't think Biden's public performances have inspired much confidence, but I mean, the debate was a, was an extreme example of that, but, um, I don't, you know, I, I, I don't know if his other appearances have, you know, they've been better, but, uh, I think you're sort of grading on a curve there too.

Festa: There's no real public campaign that can oust Biden. It's really going to be up to him to step aside, right? That's really the only thing that would create the possibility of a different ticket

Kondik: And look, I mean if you do have a bunch of uh, Senior democrats who make public their desire for Biden to leave that does amp up the pressure on him Although it also probably damages Biden Additionally if if he does decide to stay in the race, I mean, it's a tough.

It's a it's a uh tough position and again, you know you could have others in the party can exert as much pressure as they want. Um, Biden's really the only one who could follow through with it, you know, the the delegates are technically they're pledged. They're not bound So like there could hypothetically be a revolt at the convention Although democrats are also slated to nominate Biden virtually in advance of the convention maybe that changes and that's something to watch going forward here, but

Festa: I saw that. Yeah.

Kondik: but uh, um you know, again, it really, the decision really is in, in Biden's hands. And look, I mean, the, the campaign is not going all that well. And I think if you're a Democrat, there's not much reason to have faith that his public performances would, you know, would improve over time. Um, he could, in fact, he could possibly have, um, another debate performance or other performance that along the lines of what we saw on, on June 27th and, you know, I will, I'll say, I mean, I think a lot of people.

We're probably quicker on the sort of observation that Biden was like very clearly diminished. I kind of thought, yes, he was diminished, but that he had generally done okay in sort of his big public appearances in, you know, over the last year or so. Um, but, uh, it's just hard to, it's just really impossible to say that after, after the debate.

Festa: Yeah. And speaking of that debate, all anybody could talk about for a couple of weeks, obviously before the events of this weekend, I read some of your polling that indicated that there was some noteworthy shifting in the projections for the Electoral College. Particularly in the upper midwest. Isn't that right?

Kondik: Yeah, we, uh, a few weeks ago we moved, uh, a couple of states, uh, Minnesota from likely Dem to Leans Dem and Michigan from Leans Dem to toss up. Uh, and again, you could have, you probably could have done those things based on polling earlier than that. But, um, but again, we sort of had some more faith that.

Biden would at least pull this thing back into more of like a toss up election. And the debate really, um, kind of impacted our, our confidence in his ability to do that.

Festa: And was that the primary area of the country you saw things shifting or did you also see some shifts elsewhere?

Kondik: This is all, I mean, everything is connected here.

So like, if you're going to move Michigan from lean D to toss up, you probably also need to downgrade them in Minnesota because. You know, the, if there's movement across the upper Midwest, you know, Trump did almost carry Minnesota in 2016. Um, and so part of what we've done in our, you know, recent electoral college updates, both in June and in July was just to sort of reflect that a national picture that just wasn't, wasn't, wasn't good for Biden and didn't show much signs of getting better.

And so, you know, if we were to make additional changes going forward, Um, you know, you you probably would I don't think it's just limited to one state, you know I mean there's been talk about like a Virginia or New Mexico getting more competitive and like There's some polling evidence that that might be the case um, not that I don't really expect trump to win those states, but um, if trump is, you know, if he's actually You know winning the national popular vote Um, you'd see you know might not be a uniform swing across the states But you would see places where Biden did better than he did in the popular vote Uh, um, you know, those, those states, those states start to, start to, uh, uh, tighten up quite considerably, um, because again, you, you, you're gonna see changes across the, across the competitive map, you know, when you go from 2016 to 2020.

You know, Biden did roughly two and a half points better in the national popular vote than Clinton did almost every state got more democratic. There were like just a few that didn't. So you would see, you know, some states move more than others, but, um, the states don't move in isolation.

Festa: Yeah, and Biden won, if I remember correctly, the popular vote by around 7 million votes, right?

It's not like Trump would need to flip that entirely and win it by 7 million himself. But even a shift of a couple hundred thousand would be a pretty huge deal, right?

Kondik: Yeah, I mean, look, I mean, the, the, um, if you look at the states that, that put, uh, uh, Biden over the top, you know, it's Wisconsin, Arizona, Georgia, all of which were decided by less than a point, you know, Biden did slightly better in Wisconsin than he did in Arizona and Georgia.

Right. Um, I, it kind of seems like there, there may be less of a discrepancy between the sort of popular vote, the tipping point state and the presidential race. It was like a four point gap in 2020. Um, but still again, if you move, if you just move the national popular vote to a tie, it's a four and a half point shift at the net, at the, um, you know, for the national popular vote.

And again, that would have to have ramifications on the electoral college alignment.

Festa: Definitely, definitely, definitely. I appreciate you entertaining all of my presidential questions there. Let's take a step back from the presidential race and take a look at some of Sabato's other polling from the last few weeks and reporting.

Lots of interesting stuff we could dive into, but I'm curious about how the presidential polling you were seeing a couple of weeks ago affected your projections for the House of Representatives. I thought that was a really interesting piece from you guys.

Kondik: Just as a reason that again, if you do see a shift at the national popular vote, that's going to trickle down to house races too.

And so there are a number of marginal districts out there that voted for Biden that, that, probably would vote for Trump in a situation where, you know, the national popular vote is tied. So like, you know, there's a seat in Pennsylvania There are a couple of open seats in Michigan. There are other seats dotted across the competitive map, but you know, we talk about Oh, well, you know, the, the, the, the Republicans are defending, I think now it's, it's, um, if you, if you set aside redistricting from 2020, post 2022, uh, you know, the Republicans are defending 17 Biden won seats that they won in 2022.

Um, the Democrats are defending just five Trump won seats, but like, if the national popular vote is different. Those, those numbers are going to change too. So, that's what my colleague Miles Coleman wrote about is that, you know, Trump's just going to win more districts. Um, and there's, there's been a pretty strong alignment between the presidential and the House results recently.

So, I mean, my whole thinking on the House has just been that I basically think the odds for the House are very similar to the presidential odds. So I don't really think the presidential race is 50 50 now. I think trump is favored to some degree So that naturally translates to the house too in my own thinking it would be very odd historically Unprecedented I think for the white house to change parties But for the for the uh for the house to change parties in the opposite direction, you know You just think that I mean again, it's it's possible like you can come up with ways that it could happen But I just wouldn't think that that is very likely So, um at this point, I think it's reasonable to say that republicans are favored in The House, um, uh, the Senate, and the presidential race.

Um, again, nothing's guaranteed, but that's just where I see it right now.

Festa: Yeah, I was about to ask, the same can be said for the Senate, of course, right?

Kondik: Yeah, I mean, look, I mean, the, you know, the, the Democrats basically have to win all the competitive races again. It's possible that that could happen. Um, but, but I don't think it would be, you know, again, I think it's, it's well south of 50, 50 that that would happen.

Festa: Yeah, certainly makes sense. Everything is interconnected. Like you said, there's everything, uh, you know, when one thing shifts, another thing follows. So it makes perfect sense here.

Kondik: Yeah. I mean, look, this isn't, you know, this isn't, this isn't the, this isn't the 1960s or 1970s where like, You know, you could have Richard Nixon, you know, blowing out George McGovern, but Democrats really doing perfectly fine in, in House and Senate races.

Now, look, maybe there's going to be more ticket splitting this time than there's been in the last couple presidential elections. Certainly polling suggests that at the Senate level. Um, right now, um, but you'd expect things to ultimately, um, you know, to, to, to line up more and if it does, and Biden's presidential position doesn't improve, um, that has negative consequences for Democrats down ballot.

Festa: No, definitely. Thank you for adding that. No polling here per se from *Sabato's*, but again, from one of your colleagues, I thought this was pretty interesting about. Where abortion might show up on the ballot this November, I believe five states as of now, talk to me a little bit of how, you know, things might expand there.

Are we expecting abortion to be added to more ballots moving into November? What are you projecting there?

Kondik: Yeah, of the, of the real kind of marquee, uh, presidential swing states, Arizona, Nevada stand out as states that are, that will or are likely to have, um, uh, abortion rights related statewide ballot issues.

You know, my expectation would be that those ballot issues would probably pass and, but they would also get votes from a substantial number of people who are

voting. Um, Republican or voting third party for, for president wouldn't just be democratic presidential voters and maybe abortion helps on the margins in terms of democratic turnout.

Um, but I do think that, that ballot issues are just on a different track than the, the, the partisan races, you know, Florida is another state that's, that's, uh, um, uh, is going to have it on. And there, there's, there are a few other places. Um, where you should see, uh, abortion rights, a ballot issue.

Some of them are still kind of in flux, Arkansas and Nebraska are too, um, that, that are in that, uh, in that category.

Festa: And you mentioned third parties. We're going to be talking a little bit more about that next week on the show with another special guest. But. Say a little, if you can, about the effect that third parties might have on this election.

I feel like every time I read about it, I hear something different about how they might affect, you know, not only the presidential race, but races down the ballot.

Kondik: Yeah.

Festa: Do you feel like they'll affect one party more than the other? Or is it still too early to tell?

Kondik: I think it's too early to tell. Um, you know, Cornel West and Jill Stein like naturally track as people who would take votes from Biden.

Um, you know, Libertarian, you generally think taking for the Republican column, although Chase Oliver, the Libertarian candidate is certainly not nearly as prominent as Gary Johnson was in the 2016 race. And then Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is I think is more of kind of a, kind of a wild card. Um, you know, if you, if you compare the, the, the, the head to head between Biden and Trump and the, you know, the full ballot, usually the margin is pretty similar, but again, some of these states are so close that, um, perhaps there'd be a different outcome if it was just

head to head versus the full ticket. And, you know, we're still figuring out exactly where these candidates are and are not going to be on the

I guess Trump and RFK Jr. just had a conversation, some video of it leaked, um, just this morning about, you know, RFK maybe endorsing Trump or, you know, something like that. Um, I, I don't, you know, maybe there'll be news on that by the time this posts, but that was just something floating around this morning.

Festa: I was going to say, it's getting harder to record these episodes because there are updates, you know, it seems every couple of hours, uh, to queue up, so that might be news by the time this comes out, like you said, but. Before I let you go, Kyle, what else should our listeners be looking out for these next few weeks?

What are you watching?

Kondik: Um, look, I think the I think the the the conversation about about Biden being the nominee is not going to just is not just going to go away Um, and again, I think just you know, I think that there are real risks to for democrats to continue with Biden as the nominee Um again, that doesn't necessarily mean that Kamala Harris the likeliest replacement would be better She might end up being worse, but she also could be better You And, uh, Democrats need to, uh, um, you know, Democrats need to consider the potential upside because again, I think things are, things are fairly dire for, for Biden.

I think, again, he could still win and all that, but, but it's, it's, I was, you know, again, I was, I was, uh, looking at this as a 50 50 sort of thing, and that's just, I just don't think that that's, that's really where it is anymore.

Festa: Well said. Kyle Kondik, thank you again. Great to have you back on the show.

Thank you. And for our listeners, you can learn more about Kyle's work at the link in our bio and more about *Sabato's Crystal Ball*. We'll be back next week with another episode. Make sure you subscribe to *On the Ballot* wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm Frank Festa, and thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.